

Legalisation

one way or no way

KEY to the legalisation stance is the evidence that current policies are not working. According to the 2000 British Crime Survey 25% of 16 to 29 year olds have tried illegal drugs in the last year.

However, among those aged 30 to 59 this proportion drops to 5%. The idea that you might as well legalise all drugs because pretty much the entire UK population is doped up to the eyeballs is clearly based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the statistics on the actual extent of illegal drug use within the UK.

How can we judge the possible impact of legalisation? The closest parallel is probably with tobacco and alcohol.

It is difficult to believe that the legality of tobacco and alcohol has had no impact on their becoming among the most widely used drugs in our society. Nor could it be said that legalisation has limited the enormous damage associated with their use.

The amount of harm associated with heroin and cocaine is only a fraction of the harm associated with tobacco and alcohol. On that basis it could be said that alcohol and tobacco are much more harmful than either cocaine or heroin. But of course only a tiny fraction of people in the UK are currently using heroin and cocaine. If that number increased to anything like the number of people drinking and smoking, the number of addict deaths would be in the tens of thousands.

SHOT IN THE DARK

Those in support of the legalisation of all drugs would no doubt offer reassurance that the number of people using heroin or cocaine would largely remain the same even if these drugs were legalised. But how do they know this? The answer, of course, is that they don't. Nobody does. Their belief that legalisation would not increase use is simply an act of faith. The costs of being wrong are likely to be dramatic.

It is often pointed out that a legal change must be accompanied by substantial investment in drug treatment to treat those who might become addicted. But we are a long way from having effective methods of treating heroin addiction and even further from knowing how to treat cocaine addiction. Similarly, it is often said that we would need an intensive programme of drug education. This sounds plausible but research on drug education has consistently shown it does little to reduce levels of drug use. In light of this we should be more, not less, cautious about any policy that might increase the use of such drugs as heroin and cocaine.

Former cabinet minister

Mo Mowlam has called for the legalisation of all drugs.

But says, **Neil McKeganey**, the price of legalisation is not simply an issue for the UK government, bound as it is to various international treaties. But even if these treaties weren't binding, is there merit in going down the road of legalisation?

WHAT PRICE ADDICTION?

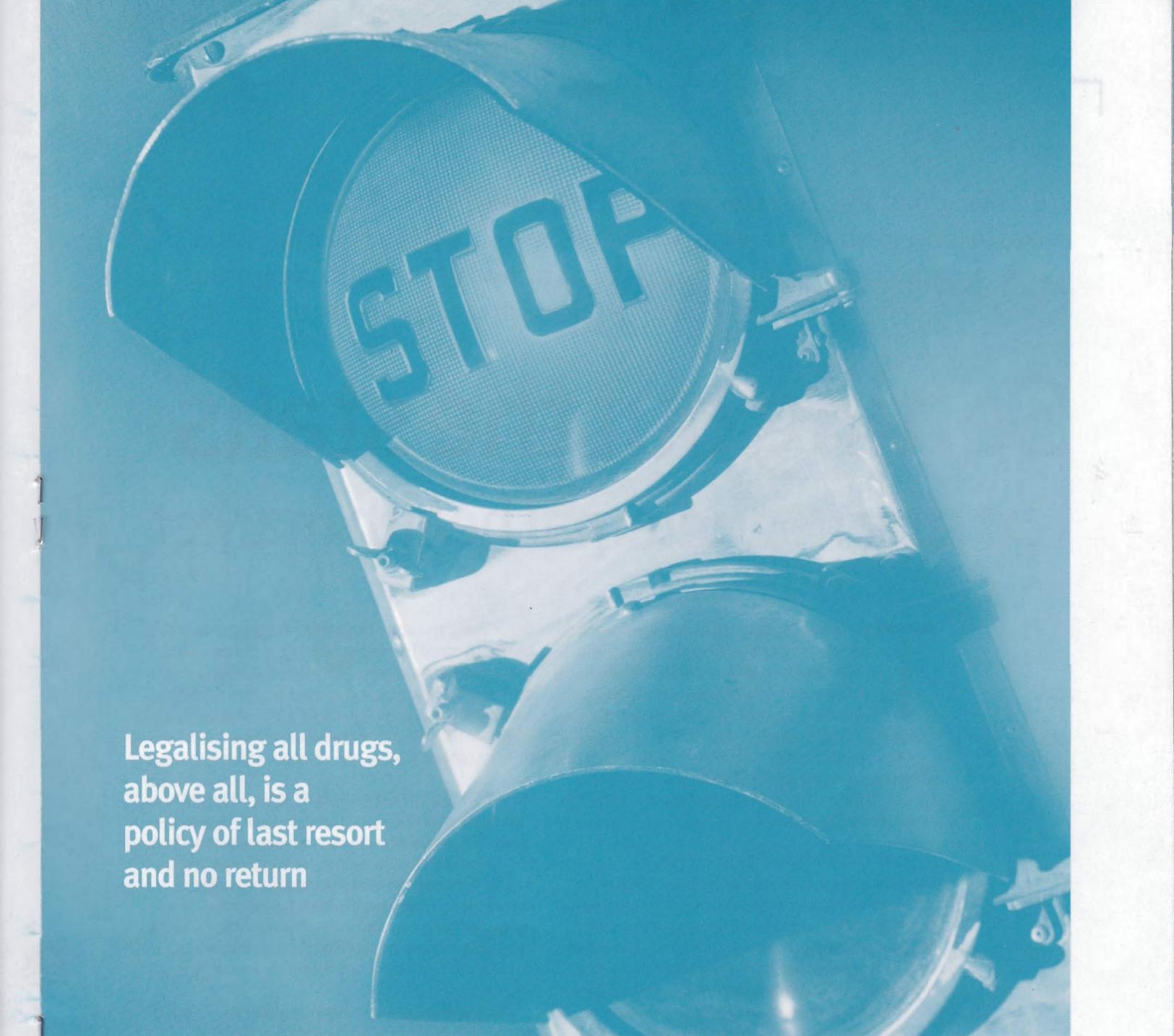
An often-cited benefit of legalisation is the opportunity to break the connection between drugs and crime. It seems naïve though to suppose that criminal organisations would not seek their illicit gains elsewhere. One response might be to undercut licensed heroin and cocaine. In this situation the government could find itself in a price war with organised crime. This would create a downward pressure on the price of heroin and cocaine and potentially an increase in the number of people using the drugs. By reducing the price of heroin and cocaine one would also be reducing the tax that could be charged on its sale.

Of course any price for drugs is too much for some. Addiction is costly and a waste of lives. The government's response might be to provide heroin free on prescription to addicts. While this option is in keeping with the recent report from the Home Affairs Select Committee, it is effectively saying to people that they have to buy their own heroin unless they become addicted to it. Only then will it be provided for free.

By prescribing free heroin, we are, in effect, rewarding those who have become addicted and penalising occasional users. The alternative of not providing heroin for free would a potential increase in the number of addicts resorting to crime to pay for their drugs.

Most agree that venues where heroin and cocaine might be sold should not be accessible to children. Our success in restricting young peoples' access to heroin

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and cocaine in a fully legalised environment would presumably be as successful as our ability to restrict underage access to alcohol and tobacco. In which case we should expect large numbers of children to access heroin and cocaine, with major adverse effects.

NO TURNING BACK ON SMACK

Legalising all drugs, above all, is a policy of last resort and no return. At the recent DrugScope annual lecture the Portuguese minister responsible for depenalising drugs was asked what he would regard as evidence that the policy of legalisation was not working and what would he do in that event. He paused before answering and then replied that the government were confident the experiment in legalisation would work. That of course is the rub. Once you have gone down the road of total legalisation it is difficult to see where else you can go.

What do we do if heroin and cocaine use increase following legalisation? Clearly we cannot suddenly re-criminalize these drugs and even if we could over

time, we may have doubled our addict population in the process. Legalisation is a policy which, if employed, would simply have to work. Its failure in the sense of a marked increase in the number of people using heroin and cocaine is too problematic to contemplate.

What are the alternatives if we reject legalisation? My own view is that rather than softening our stance on illegal drugs we need to be tougher on the poverty and social exclusion that lie at the heart of so much drug use. Many communities have been decimated by poverty and illegal drugs. Many have given up all hope of anybody making progress in tackling their problems.

We have come up with many initiatives and new funding streams to help these communities. My own view is that we need to listen to what communities are saying about how to tackle the drugs and other problems in their area. If they come up with suggestions that we feel are unpalatable, it is very probably because their experience is so different from our own. ■